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The Armenian genocide

Sunday, April 24, 2005

Ninety years ago today was the start of what most Armenians, and most historians, consider the first genocide of the 20th century. April 24, 1915, marked the beginning of the systematic Turkish slaughter and deportation of some 1.5 million Armenians. In a pattern that has been repeated too often since, the world watched and clucked its tongue.

Adolf Hitler, whose refinement of the processes of mass extermination has been unequalled, took note. "Who today still speaks of the massacre of the Armenians?" he's widely quoted as having said, reminding his military chiefs that history's benediction usually goes to the winners.

Armenians around the world, including 150,000 or so in the tristate region, are gathering today in commemoration of that massacre and to press for international recognition of the atrocities that occurred as the Ottoman Empire was crumbling.

Seventeen countries, including Russia, France and Canada, have passed legislation recognizing the genocide, but the United States has not. Neither has its ally, Turkey, which adamantly disputes that genocide occurred and countered with the release last Sunday of a list of more than a half-million Turks it says were killed by Armenians from 1910 to 1922.

Does it really matter what we call an event that happened so many decades ago? It does. It matters because how we see the past helps determine how we view the present and the future.

It matters because when a population has been threatened with extermination and the world trivializes it, the sense of injustice becomes the burden and rage of the next generations.

In the case of Armenia, it especially matters because the ethnic violence over territory so closely resembles the modern-day genocides of Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur.

"If there is one legacy I would most wish to leave to my successors, it is an organization both better equipped to prevent genocide and able to act decisively to stop it when prevention fails," United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said.

So far, there's been much discussion but insufficient action. That the U.N. has referred suspected Darfur war criminals to the International Criminal Court is important, but it's not a corrective. The Bush administration rightly refers to the

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killings in Darfur as genocide, but it has not kept Darfur at the top of its agenda. On Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's recent trip to Russia -- which continues to sell arms to the Sudan government -- the topic didn't come up.

A start would be the administration's support of measures by Sens. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) and Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), passed in the Senate last week, that call for stronger sanctions and a diplomatic offensive on Darfur. President Bush could also support a Corzine amendment calling for an additional \$90 million to augment the small African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur.

There are two ways to give the Armenian genocide the attention it deserves. One is to call it by its name. The other is to honor the often-breached pledge of "Never again."

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